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Memorandum

THE SITUATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

18 May 1964

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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**CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
MEMORANDUM**

THE SITUATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

1. Viewed from Hanoi, the guerrilla-subversive war to dislodge US forces and influence and establish Communist control in Laos and South Vietnam is doubtless going well. The time-tested technique of using terror against the populace, guerrilla warfare against anti-Communist armed forces, and subversion against governments friendly to the US is paying off for the Communists.

2. The objective is to augment Communist political and military power, and to demonstrate that being anti-Communist--or even independent non-Communist--is dangerous, costly and unlikely to succeed for any long period of time. The struggle focuses particularly on the morale of the Saigon and Vientiane regimes and populations, seeking to persuade them that vastly superior power resides in North Vietnam, and behind that in China. In addition, the strategy is designed to demonstrate that when the chips are down, the US is an unreliable and ineffective protector of its friends in Asia.

3. This struggle, which has gone on for a number of years, is paced and timed according to two tactical principles. One is to expand Viet Minh, Viet Cong, and Pathet Lao control wherever and whenever political or military weaknesses in the opposition allow it. The other is to push just hard enough to discredit and frustrate US forces in the area, but not enough to provoke a major war. If Hanoi does not miscalculate what the traffic will bear, and if all elements including the US follow present courses, there will almost certainly be a continuing accretion of Communist power in Laos, and, chances better than even, in South Vietnam as well.

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4. It is observation of these gradual trends that causes tremors of neutralism in Bangkok and outright anti-Americanism in Phnom Penh. Asians are political realists of long standing, and the politicians want mainly to be on the winning side so as to enjoy the prestige and prerequisites of power, while the people simply want to be left alone to raise rice and babies. Many Southeast Asians think Communist China will eventually dominate the area because it is so big and so close.

5. Many others recognize the great US military might but are troubled by the apparent US inability to apply this power effectively to their local situation. Some day, they believe, the US may walk out, leaving outspoken pro-American political and military leaders alone to face the vengeance of the Communists and of their own brethren who accommodated earlier.

6. The Communists now are putting the heat on in both Laos and South Vietnam, exploiting the opportunities provided by the Rightist coup in the former, and seeking to undercut the nascent Khanh government in the latter before it can stabilize the situation. Thus Hanoi has built up its military force in Laos to the levels of 1962, prior to the signing of the Geneva Accords, and is stiffening the Pathet Lao to shatter the Kong Le neutralists and undermine the Souvanna Phouma government. This pressure can be turned on or off as the gains and risks suggest. At the same time the Laos corridor to South Vietnam can be used to augment support of the Viet Cong and so maintain heavy pressure on the Khanh regime.

7. This method gives the Communist activists the initiative and the control of timing. If they do not feel strong enough to push through to major military victories now, they will hope for psychological warfare victories that will make their task easier some months hence. Their basic aim is to weaken the will to resist among the anti-Communists, to the point where the whole fabric of governments and

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forces friendly to the US will wash away, leaving the US nothing to fight for or with in those areas.

8. The year 1964 is likely to be critical in this battle for control of Southeast Asia. The regime in Vientiane is in a shambles; the government in Saigon, while showing some promise, is confronting great odds. A sudden collapse of morale is possible in either place. Cambodia continues to aid Communist infiltration and subversive efforts in behalf of the Viet Cong. Thailand will, if this situation continues, probably prepare to hedge its bets. For all these reasons, the US may, by the year end, be unable to rally effectively the friendly forces necessary to preserve the Western position in Mainland Southeast Asia.

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